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# MANGA GOES GLOBAL

Jean-Marie Bouissou

WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO OTOMO KATSUHIRO'S 'AKIRA'  
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Unedited. Comments welcome.

## Abstract

OTOMO Katsuhiko's Akira was published in Japan from 1982 to 1993. When translated into French (1991-1995), the eleven volumes series was given an unusual first-class treatment - complete with colors and hard-cover. Its French publisher targeted well-educated high-income urbanites at a time when manga were still considered cheap stuff for children or semi-illiterate teenagers.

The fact is that Akira is in a class of its own. It stands out as a highly sophisticated cultural object far away from the standard manga's violence and sex routine. It became a cult-series in France, although this fortress of the "école franco-belge" is a very difficult market for foreign comics. It also succeeded in the US - which is hardly an easy market either. Akira the movie enjoyed worldwide success.

Akira's echo in the West - like Doraemon's success throughout Asia - epitomizes the fact that contemporary manga is the vehicle of a culture which appeals to audiences all around the world. This makes it a major element of Japan's soft power and a worthy subject for academic research.

The aesthetical and ethical standards of manga are worlds apart from those of American mainstream comics (Disney and superheroes) and the "école franco-belge". They are deeply rooted into what Saya SHIRAISHI calls "the Original Experience and the Original Picture" - A-bombed Japan of 1945. Since this experience was unique, the first mangas were not so much for export.

Akira transcends the Original Experience by combining it with the "postmodern" sensibility. Space, time, narrative logics, meanings and values systems are methodically de-constructed -until the way to the future is left wide open to the optimistic energy of the youngsters with no signpost at all. Akira is an empty structure for every reader to fill with his or her own experiences, dreams and desires. This is quite the opposite of Disney's way to reach "global" audience - but nevertheless an efficient one. Furthermore, OTOMO broke with both the Japanese-ness and fantasy typical of many mangas by enriching Akira with the real-life experiences common to teenagers from all over the world. This is especially noticeable in the subtle manner in which sexual emotions are depicted.

OTOMO also "globalized" Akira by using innumerable images and clichés drawn from Western culture. His work is an amazing cultural melting-pot - complete with Buddhism, Big-Bang theory revisited and a main character who mixes the bad boy next door with Jesus-Christ, Frankenstein, Superman, "Lord of the Flies", "2001 Space Odyssey" and much more...

Last but not least, OTOMO made the best of the movies-like narrative technique of the manga, which removes the language barrier. He pushed this technique to a point where almost no printed words are necessary and the reader is drawn into an interactive relationship with the book, as if he or she plays a videogame. Thus, even the Japanese version of Akira is almost readily accessible to any foreigner.

OTOMO built upon both the Original Experience's heritage and the narrative technique peculiar to mangas to produce a cultural object deliberately intended for the world market. Thus, Akira is a striking example of successful globalization. But it remains to be seen if it carries any meanings or ideology which might be an original contribution to the "global culture" of the next century.

The statistics about manga industry are impressive. About one third of all the paper used for printing in Japan is used for comics magazines and books. In 1995, the circulation of manga magazines surpassed 2 billion, and the total earnings for printed manga alone surpassed 600 billion yen - \$6 billion (ARTE). But the bulk of the profit is made through TV-series, animation movies (*anime*) and licensed goods. Some sources put the total earnings of the Japanese character-merchandising industry at \$15 billion for 1995 - on par with Korean giant Hyundai's revenues (TESORO, p.35). Combined with the videogames industry, the total earnings of Japanese "pop culture" industry may exceed \$30 billion, and much more if hardware for video viewing and computer games is added.

Admittedly, the Japanese manga and *anime* industry is not quite on par with Disney and Hollywood. The Japanese all-time animation hit, *Princess Mononoke*, which reached 12 million viewers and earned more than 17 billion yen (\$131 million) (AMAHA) during the summer of 1997 is dwarfed by the many billions earned by *Titanic* to date. Japan matches neither the \$4 billion in surplus from the trade of movies between the US and the rest of the world nor the total spending for movie-viewing by the American (\$18,4 billion in 1992 against only \$5 billion for the Japanese) (TURNER). Nevertheless, for the first time, American giant producers of comics, animation and TV-series are confronted worldwide by foreign competitors. Although the taking-over of MCA studios by Matsushita in 1991 ended in a failure four years later, three Japanese multimedia companies now rank among the world's top ten (TURNER).

This is doubly significant, since the competition in "soft" industry is not only a matter of big money. To export comics is also to export ideology and values system. Hence the stubborn opposition raised by France against the extension of the rules of the free-trade to cultural goods in the name of "l'exception culturelle", or the total ban on Japanese manga enforced by the Korean government until very recently.

The significance of manga began attracting attention during the 80s. Comics and *anime* gained official recognition in Japan. In 1983, Otomo Katsuhiro - the father of *Akira* - became the first manga artist (*mangaka*) ever to be awarded the prestigious Science Fiction Grand Prix (SCHILLING, p.173). In 1985, manga appeared in textbooks for high schools; but since 1975, the all-times hit *Berusaïyu no Bara*, or *Beru-bara* for short - an historical romance about the French queen Marie-Antoinette which was serialized in "Margaret" in 1972-1973 - was already selected as supplementary text by teachers all over Japan. In 1990, the National Museum of Arts mounted an exhibition of the work of Tezuka Osamu (1926-1989), the

founding father of the postwar manga-art, nicknamed *Manga no kamisama* (the "God of Manga"). In 1995, Studio Ghibli's *Pompoko* was awarded a Special Award at the Japan Academy Award, the first time for an animation film (idem, p.144).

Even the academic world began to take comics seriously. In recent years, papers about manga appeared in Japan Forum, Journal of Asian Studies, Journal of Popular Culture and Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars. Two workshops were devoted exclusively to it at the Congress of International Association of Asian Studies in Hawaii, in 1996.

This paper explains how the manga industry broke with the parochial tradition of Japanese culture and rose as the world's N°2 exporter of cultural goods. It puts emphasis upon the penetration of Japanese comics on the American and Western markets, because an enlightening paper already analyzed how "Doraemon (came) to Asia" (SHIRAIISHI). It weights the significance of this phenomenon, by answering the question: did manga succeeded by raising new ideological and aesthetical values, or simply by parroting Disney? Otomo Katsuhiro's *Akira* is of special significance for answering this question, because - as Mark Schilling writes: "No other Japanese manga even approaches Akira's international success, though many have exceeded it in the domestic market" (p.174). Thus, the third part of this paper is devoted to *Akira*.

## **MANGA GOES ABROAD: THE STORY**

Since comics appeared - around 1890 - two major areas produced and consumed the bulk of them. Europe witnessed the flourishing of the so-called Ecole Franco-belge, which gave birth to some of the most successful characters to date: since 1929, *Tintin* has sold about 180 million books worldwide, and *Asterix* more than 250 million (BARON-CARVAIS, p.100). Nevertheless, European comics industry remained underdevelopped, with mainly small-scale publishers devoted uniquely to BD (short for "bande dessinée"). To the contrary, the US comics industry, which flooded the world market with *Mickey* and many more, turned multimedia and built a strong base of giant studios.

## The failure of the first attempt

### The United States: a pseudo-Disney and a few giant robots

Tezuka Osamu, "The God of Manga" was the first *mangaka* whose comics went abroad. *Jungle taitei*, serialized in Japan from 1950 to 1954, soon appeared in the US as "Kimba the White Lion", and in France as "Le roi Leo". The rights of his first TV series - *Tetsuwan atomu* (1963) - were sold to over twenty countries. Subsequently, comics books featuring the atomic robot-boy were published for the American market, and also in France as "Astro le petit robot". But in order to succeed, the cute mechanical little thing has to abandon any reference to anything atomic - he was renamed Astro - and has been redrawn to suit American taste and comply with the Comics Code (FUJISHIMA p.154). Tezuka's subsequent TV series - *Kimba* and *W3* ("The Amazing Three": 1965-1966) were also bought by American TV, and the comics books followed.

Tezuka brought to the American audience something rather familiar. Although his work reflected the trauma inflicted by the A-bomb upon Japanese postwar collective psyche and featured movies-like narrative techniques unused by American cartoonists, his cute and round-shaped characters were typically reminiscent of Disney's movies - which Tezuka loved and dreamed to emulate. Also, the values system of Tezuka's world was of the Good vs. Bad/Happy End type. Thus, it was received as a kind of gently exotic sub-Disney.

But local studios succeeded in preventing the Japanese from entering the American market en masse. The Comics Code and "political correctness" were effective weapons against foreign competition - even earning Tezuka's *Cleopatra* the dubious honour of being the first animation film to be X-rated by the American censorship in 1970 (GROENSTEEN p.77). During the 70s and 80s, Disney and Tex Avery reigned supreme on TV time slots for children. Their mass-production was enough for feeding the growing young TV audience. Those few Japanese series which made it featured mostly giant warrior robots - a character foreign to American comics: Yokoyama Misuteru's *Tetsujin-28 go* ("Iron Man N°28"), Nagai Go's *Getta robotto* ("The Starvengers"), Matsumoto Reiji's *Unchū senkan Yamato* (renamed Battle of the Planets, 1974) and *Ginga tetsudo 999* ("Galaxy Express 999" - 1976) (GROENSTEEN, p.104).

Having pushed the Japanese out of the market, American comics powerhouses nevertheless recognized the appeal that the exotical and action-packed Japanese-style comics could enjoy among young audience. They marketed pseudo-manga of their own. Marvel Comics' *Shogun Warriors* series - whose scripts were based on Japanese popular series - and Comico's *Robotech* nourished a growing appetite for "the real thing". Furthermore, the American pseudo-manga artists - like Frank Miller - kept in touch with their Japanese colleagues, whom they credited for their inspiration. They were to be instrumental in bringing back the real thing to the United-States.

#### **The European market: child romance, robots and sex**

During this 1970-1980 period, "Japanese comics culture has had a far greater influence in Europe" (SCHODT, p.156). The Japanese TV series scored big in France, Italy and Spain. The most successful ones were Igarashi Mitsuko and Mizuki Kyoko's *Candy Candy* (from 1975 to 1979 in "Nakayoshi"), Nagai Go's *Goldorak* (from 1972 in "Shōnen Jump" and aired in TV from 1974 to 1977 as *Grandizer*) and Matsumoto Reiji's sci-fi series *Captain Harlock* (*Albator*: 1977). This success can be attributed to the well-rooted and peculiar comics culture which flourished under the influence of the so-called "école franco-belge" - whose own God is Hergé, the father of *Tintin*. In France, the censorship was much more lenient than in the US, and almost non-existent in Italy. Thus, the readers were accustomed to new comics experiences. Above all, the local studios were unable to deliver enough low-priced series to accomodate the exploding demand from children TV channels. In 1984, Japanese studios produced about 1800 26' episodes of TV-series, at a cost of less than \$3000 a minute, while the French studios turned out only 450, at a price of \$5000. Since the French TV channels broadcasted more than twice that amount, about 450 episodes had to be imported (BARON-CARVAIS, p.108). And since the American cartoons were priced at about \$4000 dollars per minute, the Japanese got the bonanza.

But no "manga boom" followed. The magazines which capitalized upon the success of the TV series were poorly-drawn products by local studios. Only *Candy Candy* was published in Italy using the original artwork, with colors added - and also briefly in France as a monthly magazine ("Candy Poche", 1982) (GROENSTEEN p.132). Dargaud, one of the BD powerhouses, published *Albator* in a deluxe hardbound form, but failed to seduce the sophisticated readers whom it was looking after (SCHODT p.158).

The French BD powerhouses managed to keep predominance on their domestic market. The mainstream publishing houses (Dargaud, Casterman) rested upon "catch-all" characters artfully tailored to please both children and adults. The embodiment of these "catch-all characters" was Hergé's Tintin, whose marketing motto was "Pour les jeunes de 7 à 77 ans". The mainstream BD offered a large range of characters, from the mildly humoristic ones (Asterix, Lucky Luke) to the western adventurers (Lieutenant Blueberry) and sci-fi heroes (Valerian and his companion Laureline). The only audience that the "catch-all heroes" did not catered for was the young girls - hence the success of *Candy Candy*. Also, in the wake of the student uprising in May 1968, a large number of underground iconoclastic comics magazines flourished. "Charlie", "Pilote", "Métal hurlant" and "Hara-Kiri" satisfied the demand for sophisticated comics for grown-up readers, thus keeping manga out of the French market.

By large, manga's audience remained limited to three categories. The children, enticed by the TV series, bought magazines, whose poor drawing and either simplistic violence or "cute" (*kawai*) childishness infuriated both their parents and TV critics. Nevertheless, the young European's pocket money was enough to buy over 5 million copies of *Goldorak* comics between 1975 and 1983 (SCHODT, p.157) The amateurs of erotic cartoons, which *bona fides* BD artists despised, were treated with Japanese hot stuff by magazines like "BédéX" or "SM Comix". The small group of hardcore manga buffs has to content with the occasional publication of some episodes by underground comics magazines. Only one attempt was made at launching a manga magazine: in 1979-1981, "Le Cri qui tue" (Atoss Takemoto Ed.) featured pieces of famous series like Saito Takao's *Golgo 13* or Tezuka's *Birdman Anthology*. But "Le Cri qui tue" was discontinued after only six issues. Still in 1985, the main book for students and the general public about "La bande dessinée" made almost no mention of manga - only two and half pages from 127 (BARON-CARVAIS).

### **Exoticism, please! The failure of "Barefoot Gen"**

The most deliberate attempt during the 80s to introduce a manga to sophisticated Western audience was made by the American peace civic group "Project Gen", whose volunteers translated *Hadashi no Gen* - the vivid memories from Hiroshima by Nakazawa Keiji, which was serialized in "Shukan Shōnen Jump" (mostly) from 1973 to 1983. But "Gen of Hiroshima" (1980) was discontinued after only two volumes (200 pages) due to poor sales - though Nakazawa's monumental pacifist saga has over 1500 pages. Gen also did poorly in France despite two tries (1983, Les Humanoïdes Associés, Albin Michel, 1990) and in England as "Barefoot Gen" (1989, Penguin Books).

Gen's failure is very revealing. The memories of an A-bomb survivor were no comic material in the eyes of Westerner, for whom fantasy is what the comics are all about. Also, the A-bomb experience, which lies at the core of the postwar collective psyche in Japan and earned Gen a tremendous success at home, was not shared by the Western audience. Furthermore, Nakazawa's narrative relies upon a grossly exaggerated - even grotesque - graphical expression of feelings and emotion. This technique is typical of many manga, but the Western audience is not accustomed to it, and deemed it out of place in such a tragic story. Though the A-bomb is of concern for the whole mankind, by all means *Hadashi no Gen* was a parochial artwork, whose both signifiant and signifié were out of touch with the sensibility of the Western readers. Manga was not about to succeed abroad unless getting rid of this parochialism.

### **Cracking the foreign market open**

Manga finally cracked the US market open in 1987-1988. One can not but notice the concomitance with two phenomenons. In 1985, the Plaza Accord pushed the yen up by almost 75%%. A flurry of Japanese investment abroad followed immediatly. This onslaught fuelled a forcefull Japan-bashing trend in the US - and also in France, though to a lesser degree. Media turned the heat on Japanese, and hate-books appeared on the shelves, including such revealing titles as *The Coming War with Japan*. The manga boom is closely linked to this conjuncture.

### **United States: surfing the Japan-bashing wave**

The author who brang manga back to American audience was Kojima Gôseki. His *Kozure ôkami*, serialized in "Manga Action" from 1970 to 1976, was introduced in 1987 to American readers as *Lone Wolf and Cub* by First Comics in an unusual deluxe, hardcover format. Its success started the manga boom in the West. Lone Wolf is a rônin called Ogami Ittô, whose family was butchered at the sole exception of his baby son - whom he delivered by ripping open the womb of his dying wife. Owing to that traumatic experience, Ittô becomes a wandering hired hand, butchering people while carrying his son in a wooden baby-cart.



More manga quickly appeared on the shelves. A joint-venture between Eclipse Comics and the American branch of manga's powerhouse Shôgakukan, Viz Communications, marketed Ikegami Ryoichi's *Mai the psychic girl* - the story of a fourteen old orphan girl with psychic powers who is sought after by secret agents. Mai's stunning success "exerted a decisive influence for the successful future of manga in America" (GROESNTEIN, p.97). It was followed by another Ikegami's work, *Crying Freeman* - a thriller in which the Japanese police and yakuza battle side-by-side the Chinese drug mafia (1989) and by Sampei Shirato's *Kamui gai-den* - a chronicle of hard peasants' life during the Tokugawa era serialized in 1982-1987 in Japan.

1988 is to be remembered as "The Year of manga". Marvel Comics started publishing *Akira*, which soon became a cult phenomenon. Shôgakukan's American arm (Viz) launched an onslaught in the US market by using the Japanese "consumer-led approach" - publishing manga magazines in a flurry, quickly discontinuing the less successful ones, then re-printing the best-selling stories as hardbound books. Viz also had a try at the European market in joint-venture with English publisher Titan. Eclipse tried to repeat *Akira*'s success with Shirow Masamune's *Appleseed* in hardbound form. Thus, as Groenstein concluded in 1992: "In the last five years, the manga made a major place for themselves in the American comics world" (GROENSTEEN p.127).

The manga-boom was powered by three factors. As the result of the Japan-bashing polemic in the media, anything Japanese - from sushi bars to karaoke and manga - enjoyed a tremendous amount of free advertising. Furthermore, those children who used to view the giant-robot series on TV during the 70s had come up to age, and looked for more sophisticated, but still exotic products. And the American cartoons, after struggling with the strigent constraints of the Comics Code for half-a-century, gradually became emasculated. The readers were tired of no violence, no sex, no police-bashing, no smoking and no-nothing.

To the contrary of the Disney-like art of Tezuka, this time, the manga delighted the American readers with the complete range of exotic deeply-rooted clichés about Japan: samurai, sword and cruelty ("*Lone Wolf*", *Kamui-gai den*), enigmatic girl ("*Mai*") and yakuza going hand-in-hand with police. Most of the characters wore kimono and their success rested largely upon prejudice. Only *Akira* changed this state of things.

### France: new comics wanted!

The manga-boom in France also started between 1986 and 1988. In 1985, - as witnessed by two papers which appeared in the monthly "Les Cahiers de la bande dessinée". The first one, in October 1986, was entitled "Le Japon, ce continent inconnu". The second one, in March 1988, spoke about "L'invasion japonaise" (GROENSTEEN p.133).

Glenat was the first publisher to recognize the full potential of manga. It started marketing *Akira* in 1991, with an initial print run of 120.000 copies - an unprecedented number for a manga. It gave to the series an unusual first-class treatment - complete with color and hard-cover (although this strategy has previously failed for *Albator*), and launched *Akira* simultaneously in Italy and Spain. It targeted well-educated high-income urbanites at a time when *manga* were still considered cheap stuff for children. By the time the fourteenth and last volume was published in 1997, *Akira* has long become a publishing sensation, and the manga mania was running full speed. "Animeland", the most informative monthly manga magazine, has been launched in 1994, and about ten publishing houses were trampling on each other feet.

While the American cautiously selected only sci-fi manga, or the ones whose characters were already popular through TV series, the French tried everything from sci-fi to *shojo manga*, nonsensical comedy, children manga, and many more. Without exception, all the publishers of BD - including the two powerhouses of the école franco-belge (Dargaud and Casterman) - turned to manga for profit. They duplicated the marketing strategy of the Japanese: first publish series black-and-white in monthly magazines, then reprint the most successful ones in hardbound volumes, sometimes with colour added. In 1997, 51 manga were translated and published in hardbound form - against only 23 pieces of literary work (SFEJ). And in only one month (August), no less than 18 series were put on the shelves by six different publishers in magazine form (ANIMELAND).

Today, France is the most important market for manga abroad. The French BD are avid and sophisticated comics readers, due to the long franco-belge tradition. But at the end of the 80s, most of the iconoclastic magazines either disappeared or were on the verge of doing so. The cartoonists who delighted the students and young adults during the 70s failed to keep in touch with the changing social and cultural environment. Their provocative style - nonsense, bad taste, systematic desecration of conservative values and derisory use of sex - became irrelevant as their greying fans became part of the establishment. They failed to attract the younger generation either, because they rested too heavily upon literary narrative techniques

(signifiant) and conveyed a blend of anarchical and marxist ideology (signifié) which seemed outdated in the eyes of the so-called "Bôf (I do not care) generation". On the other hand, the mainstream "catch-all characters" lacked a strong flavour, and some of them - like Tintin - has been running since before WWII. The French most sophisticated generation of BD readers (the postwar baby-boomers) longed for something reminiscent of the 70s - the Golden Age of iconoclastic comics. And neither the gentle "catch-all" mainstream characters or the nonsensical, intellectual style of the independant authors appealed to the younger generations. The way was open for something new - and the publishers anxiously waited for a new product to keep them afloat. Everybody was ready for the manga.

### **From manga to anime: the Ghibli-Disney battle (1990-1996)**

In Japan, manga and animation film are closely intertwined. Right after the successful broadcasting of the *Tetsuwan Atomu* TV-series in 1963, Tôei started to work on a full-lenght animated movie. In 1968, *Taiyo no Oji Horus no Daiboken* ("The Little Norse Prince Valiant"), directed by Takahata Isao, went head-to-head with *The Jungle Book* during the summer season. But *anime*, like manga, failed to crack foreign markets until the end of the 80s'. Even the *anime* sensation by Studio Ghibli, *Kaze no tani Nausicaä* (1984), despite having won first prize at sci-fi film festivals in Paris and Zagreb (SCHILLING, p.141), never made it to the movies theaters in the West. The Japanese movies industry - including Tôei, which distributed *Nausicaä* - was struggling since the 70s due to the shrinking domestic market. It lacked the means, the willingness and the expertise to challenge Disney's iron-grip upon the worldwide distribution network. From the successive mega-hits that Studio Ghibli produced for Tôei, only *Totoro* (1993) was shown in some American movies theater, without much success.

The battle between Studio Ghibli and Disney for the supremacy on the Japanese animation film market started in 1990. Starting in 1989, Miyazaki Hayao's Studio Ghibli regularly challenged Disney with an *anime* on the Japanese market during the summer season, and emerged victorious with a mega-hit, starting with *Majo no Takkyubin* (Kiki's Delivery Service). *Omoide Poroporo* (Only Yesterday) battled *The Little Mermaid* in 1991. In 1992, *Kurenai no Buta* (Porco Rosso) trounced *Beauty and the Beast* by earning 2,71 billion yen. In 1994, *Tanuki Gassen Pompoko* (Pom Poko) was pitted against *The Lion King* in a much-publicized battle called *Tanu-Leo senso* by the Japanese medias, and won handily. Furthermore,

Disney was publicly accused, in a letter signed by 158 prominent Japanese, of having plagiarized the famous Tezuka's *Jungle Taitei* (SCHILLING p.268). In 1995, *Mimi o Sumaseba* (Whisper of the Heart) trounced *Pocahontas*, earning 1,85 billion yen. Then, in 1997, Ghibli scored an all-time hit in the Japanese box-office with *Mononoke Hime*, which erased Spielberg's *E.T.* from the book of records. Disney then offered to participate as a co-producer to the next Studio Ghibli's production (*Libération*). With *Notre Dame de Paris* being only a qualified success and Western audiences noticeably beginning to lean for less standardized products, Disney finally negotiated an agreement with Studio Ghibli to distribute nine *anime* worldwide - mostly on the video shelves (SCHILLING, p.145). In France, Glenat started mass-marketing *anime* in 1996. Its video collection, "Manga", puts a new *anime* and accompanying brochure on the shelves every two weeks, for a price of only 79F (about \$13) - a paltry that much teenagers can afford from their pocket-money.

Video was a decisive factor for the success of *anime* abroad. Japanese were able to circumvent Disney's grip upon the large screen distribution networks. They also avoided the neck-breaking cost of the full-scale advertising campaign necessary to launch a movie. Through video, *anime* sneaked into large number of houses. They were rented and passed from hand to hand among the youngsters - thus becoming part of the everyday life and culture of many young Westerners.

The victory of Ghibli tells us another story than *Goldorak* - a story in which the Japanese emerged victorious not by lowering the production costs, but by the virtue of the superior quality of their products. Only 1/8th of *Mononoke Hime's* 2h13 time length have been drawn by using computer technology - and even that was a first for Studio Ghibli's staff (*LIBERATION*). Even at the giant Tôei, most of the work is still made by hands - drawing the characters on paper, reproducing the drawing on the cel, coloring it by hand, then adding the foreground...

### **The money-machine goes abroad: morphing heroes, videogames and cute cats**

Two other standard products of Japanese pop culture successfully followed the manga and *anime* abroad. One was the live-action TV series featuring morphing super-heroes. Tôei's *Power Rangers* debuted on TV Asahi in 1975. During the 80s, they appeared in South-East Asia and South America, then in Europe. After a failed attempt at the American market in

1988, distributor Saban Entertainment finally succeeded in 1993 - at the price of reshooting all the scenes where the heroes act unmasked with American actors. To suit the criteria of political correctness, one female Ranger was added, the male roles were shared equally between ethnic minorities and the too brutal "whams" from the hitting flesh were replaced by less offending metallic sounds. The show quickly caught up with American youngsters, and is still doing extremely well. Subsequently, Saban successfully marketed *VR Troopers* in 1994 and *Masked Rider* in 1995 (SCHILLING, p.190-193). Another superhero live-action TV series - Tsuburuya Eiji's *Ultraman*, which has been on TBS since 1966 and still lasting - also appeared in the US, France, Spain, Thailand and China (1993), and finally made it in the US market after being rendered politically correct by toning down the violence.

The morphing superheroes are the best possible money-machine. Since the entire cast of heroes and monsters changes every year at the beginning of a new TV season, they provide to the children a complete new set of plastic character to spend money for. During his 32 years career so far, Ultraman morphed into 23 different characters. The villains also morphed into three different types (SCHILLING p.280-281). Ultraman plastic figures are sold in more than 2000 franchises all over Japan, and in the mid-90s, more than 2000 licensed products were generating around 100 billion yen annually. The *Power Rangers'* cast similarly changes every year.

The penetration of Western market by manga is also closely linked to the success of videogames. Since the beginning, manga and videogames were interlinked. When the videogame boom started in 1983, there were over 10.000 *mangaka* in Japan - more than the manga industry needed (GROENSTEEN) The videogame industry drew into this large pool of expert workforce to produce en masse the necessary software. Some of the most successful games were converted manga: Tezuka's *Hi no tori*, Fujio-Fujiko's *Doraemon* (started in 1969 and still running) and *Ninja Hattori kun*, Toriyama's *Dragon Ball*, *Kinnikuman* and Mizuki Shigeru's *Ge ge ge no Kitarô* (mid-60s in "Shônen Magazine"). The reverse process also exists: the two most successful games by Nintendo - *Mario* and *Dragon Quest* - both became manga.

The first console - Nintendo's Famicom - debuted in Japan in 1983. Six years later, Nintendo has exported 20.330.000 machines, among whose 80% went to the United States - and the videogames has paved the way for the manga boom. Since games were not subjected to the same censorship as comics, they permitted the young American to taste the enticing flavour of the blend of exoticism, violence, humor and freedom peculiar to the fantasy world of Japanese pop culture. They were marketed directly to the young customers, thus providing

another channel to circumvent the grip of Disney. With a share of about 80% of the world market, the four Japanese makers (Nintendo, Sega, Sony and NEC) established an ultra-dominant position in this new distribution channel.

More surprising was the penetration of the foreign market by the "cheap-and-cute" stuff used as communication gifts between teenagers - whose embodiment is Sanrio's character Hello Kitty-*chan*, also known as "Hello Kitty!" (SCHILLING p.221-223). The cute little female cat with a pink nod made her debut in 1974. As the very embodiment of the Japanese *kawai* (cuteness), poor Kitty was derided by foreigners and came to symbolize the false naivety of eighteen dressing like twelve years-old to seduce middle-aging salarimen suffering from Lolita complex.

Kitty is the star of Sanrio, a company started in 1960 and turned into an international giant, with branches in six foreign countries and sales totalling 78,5 billion yen in 1995. Sanrio entered the US market in 1976 and European market in 1980. After a rather sluggish debut, Kitty-*chan* attracted attention following the manga boom. Pushed by "the power of reverse chic (...) with a heavy dose of irony" (SCHILLING, p.223), Sanrio's US sales grew to 4,1 billion yen in 1995, with 2000 stores carrying its goods. And Sanrio's sales to Asia doubled between 1991 and 1996 (TESORO, p.36).

Thus, not only manga, but the whole money-making machine built around comics characters - *anime* videos, videogames and licensed products - powered into foreign markets. This laid the ground for enduring success. The Japanese pop culture industry recreated on a worldwide scale the process that led to its enduring success at home, through the marketing of licensed goods, videos and plastic toys en masse. Since the bulk of profit comes from these goods, manga and TV-series can be sold at almost no profit. Their function is not to make big money, but to open the way for licensed goods - of which a mega-hit like Takeuchi Nakao's *Sailor Moons* can inspire over 5000 (TEROSO, p.35). Manga help to ascertain the taste of the consumers, then are used as trend-setters. They bring only a meager profit, but are invaluable tools for merchandising and advertising. TV-series provide hours and hours of free advertising. Furthermore, when going abroad, since their cost has already been covered in Japan, they can be sold for a pittance.

## REASONS FOR A SUCCESS: MASS PRODUCTION AND FREEDOM

### Mass consumer-led production

Mass-production lies at the roots of the success of manga and *anime* industry on the foreign market. Studios and publishers used exactly the same approach that spelled success for Japanese car or electronic goods industries: capitalize upon a formidable market base at home, then go abroad. To foster demand at home, stimulate it through a consumer-led strategy catering to every segment of the market, lower the production costs to the bones and market the lead-product as cheap as possible while reaping profit from accessories or "side business".

It was Tezuka "The God" himself who opened the way for mass-production. He was the first *mangaka* to hire assistants to handle the less gratifying tasks of manga drawing (adding the foreground, and so on). With their help, he was able to draw more than 200.000 pages during his 43 years career. Contemporary *mangaka* often produce pages by hundreds a month. Ishimori Shōtarō, who struck fame in the West with *Manga Nihon keizai nyunon* (California University Press and Albin Michel: "Les secrets de l'économie japonaise en bande dessinée"), was able to draw up to 500 pages a month (GROENSTEEN p.98). By comparison, a French BD artist usually takes more than a year to complete a standard 65 pages book. Hergé - "The God" of the école franco-belge - produced only about 6.000 pages during his 60 years career. The duo of Pierre Christin and Jean-Claude Mezières, the most successful ever sci-fi French cartoonists with their *Valerian* series, produced only 14 books (less than 1000 pages) in twenty years. This makes *Valerian* completely unsuitable for export to Japan, since it will provide for less than a year of standard weekly publication (16 pages a week). To the contrary, having secured a footing abroad, the manga industry is now in position to flood the world market during many years, because it has accumulated a formidable stock of comics produced during the 70s and 80s, and still turns out thousands of new pages a month. The leading manga weekly magazine - "Shōnen Jump" - has a circulation as high as 6 million (SCHILLING p.227) and delivers to its readers 465 pages a week for only 200 yen (less than \$2, or 10FF). The leading Franco-belge BD weekly for children - "Spirou" has only 111.000 readers, and the leading monthly for grown-up readers, "L'Echo des Savanes", has a circulation of less than 140.000 (LABE). This comparison spells disaster for the European BD industry.

Volume and the ensuing low cost also lies at the roots of the success of Japanese TV-series. Once again, Tezuka opened the way (SCHILLING, p.266). He started his own Mushi Production studio in order to meet the challenge of producing the *Tetsuwan Atomu* series for only 5000 yen an episode - a task that the giant Tôei deemed impossible. He borrowed the technique of "limited animation" (where only parts of the image moves) from the American studio Hanna-Barbera. He used again and again cels with the same typical expression and reduced their number from the standard 15 per second to only 5 (GROENSTEEN p.58-60). By doing so, he paved the way for the onslaught of Japanese TV-series on the European market during the 70s, because only the Japanese were able to deliver enough low-priced goods to meet the explosive growth of demand for TV programs for children. Today, the same phenomenon is repeating itself on developing countries market.

Mass-production needs mass-consumption. To foster the demand, the manga industry uses a customer-based approach unheard of in Europe and in America. Manga magazine carries a prepaid response postcard for the reader to rank his/her choice of the "three most interesting stories". Those which fail to make this ranking are discontinued after only a few weeks. The audience is all that counts. No consideration is given to any other factor - be it moral or aesthetical. In order to stimulate the demand, the manga industry is keen to cater to every segment of the market. There is a manga for everybody - from tots to schoolgirls, macho sport buffs and salarymen in their 50s. Teachers and intellectual are catered for with educational manga.

This consumer-led approach is anathema to European cartoonists, who praise themselves highly for being "artists". In America, political correctness compels the publishers and studios to tailor their products to suit the criterions of morality and decency rather than readers' taste. To the contrary, the Japanese studios answer without hesitation the readers' call for anything from sadistic sex to maggot smelling.

Nevertheless, manga are not all sex and maggots. Foreigner who used to deride Japanese cartoons as simplistic, vulgar and poorly drawn must now acknowledge that the success of manga abroad rests upon quality as well as mass-production.



## What makes manga appealing ?

The growing export of Japanese pop-culture goods can be linked to technical factors like the mass-production and money-making system built around manga characters. But this explication is too short. Manga also became popular abroad because they appealed to the taste of foreign readers - in the West and in developing countries alike. So, we must now investigate their content, in order to understand what makes them appealing for such different backgrounds as an American yuppie in The Big Apple, a jobless teenager in a French suburban ghetto, an Italian little girl and a young Indonesian from a destitute family...

### Freedom for the artists

Freedom is the key-word for explaining the success of manga. Contrary to what happened in the US, and also in Japan for the live-action movies, manga and *anime* artists had neither been domesticated by the giant production companies nor emasculated by official censorship or unofficial witch-hunt. Even today, most of the US publishers prefer to voluntarily abide by the archaic Comics Code (1949, liberalized in 1971) and political correctness criterions rather than risk the wrath of the virtue leagues, televangelists and Republican Congressmen (JACKSON). In France, the Law of July 1949 was effectively used to kill iconoclastic magazines from 1953 ("Donald") to 1982 ("Hara-Kiri"). To the contrary, the Japanese manga publishers enjoy an unparalleled degree of freedom. The prohibition against the display of pubic hairs is merely regarded as a symbolic show of authority by the police - which only arouses the imagination and creativity of *mangaka*, who mock it in every possible way.

There are cultural reasons for the freedom enjoyed by the manga: since the traditional culture blurs the distinction between Good and Bad, and does not attach moral connotation to sexual matters, Japanese society displays a high level of tolerance. Also, due to historical reasons, the Japanese medias has always been very sensitive to any official attempt at censorship, which reminds of the militarist regime. And - last but not least - the *mangaka* retain the licensing rights for their characters on top of royalties on comics. The most famous ones regularly make the list of the highest income earners and are completely immune from any financial pressure (SCHODT).

Thus, as Schodt puts it: in Japan, "cartoonist is a God" (p.139). The publishing and production houses trample on each other feet in order to woo them. They remain completely

free to draw what they want for whom they want - and usually produce stories for several rival publishers at the same time. They rule the market -with success as the only criterion. The most successful *mangaka* further enhance their freedom by creating their own production studios, schools for cartoonists and scenario writers, and even publishing company - like Nagai Gô (*Goldorak*), whose Dynamic Production employed fifty people at the beginning of the 80s (SCHODT p.143).

The same is true for the stars of the *anime*. They produce their work in small independent studios and rely upon big companies only for distribution. Tezuka once again opened the way. In 1963, rather than to shorten the episodes of *Tetsuwan Atomu* to please Tôei, he left and started his Studio Mushi, which at a time employed more than 400 people. Tezuka later started a new venture under his own name in 1976. In the same vein, the duo of Takahata Isao and Miyazaki Hayao, the most famous directors of *anime* in contemporary Japan, left Tôei soon after their first work - *Taiyo no Oji Horus no Daiboken* - became a hit. They joined a small newcomer, Studio Pro-A (1971), then Zuiyo Pictures (1973). In 1986, after producing the mega-hit *Nausicaä*, they started their own Studio Ghibli.

Today, about 450 studios work in the animation field. Most of them produce at the same time *anime*, TV series and videogames. Most of the more than 10.000 *mangaka* are free-lance. They work in small groups in crowded apartments. Since manga magazines are always looking for new talents, they can have a try at the market rather easily.

Thus, the world of *mangaka* retains a rather anarchical flavour. By managing to remain free, the Japanese cartoonists retained the money, their iconoclastic or idealist touch and their right to mock the social order. They choose subjects at will - many of which would have been anathemas both in the US or in Europe.

### **Breaking taboos**

The taboo of children's sexual fantasies was smashed by Nagai Go in 1968 in *Harenchi gaku*. In the "Shameless School", the main occupation of male students and teachers - when they are not playing mahjong, drinking sake or defecating all around the premises - is to contrive to see their female counterparts naked (SCHODT p.122) The series started a nationwide boom of *skato meguri* (to roll up the girl's skirt) among Japanese tots and teens. Despite the outraged outcry from the PTA, "Shônen Jump" ran the all-successful series during four years.

The all-powerful taboo leveled at cannibalism by the human societies was broken in 1970 by Akiyama Jôji's *Ashura* - also published by "Shônen Jump". In a rare case of successful action by outraged leagues, the *Jidô fukushi shingikai* (Committee for the Well-being of schoolchildren) of Kanagawa prefecture had Akiyama indicted, and succeeded in banning *Ashura* from bookstores. Nevertheless, cannibalism appeared again at length in the saga devoted by Shirato Sampei to the peasant uprising of the XV-XVIth centuries.

Shirato Sampei smashed the myth of "harmony" and "consensus" in Japanese society by placing the social conflict at the core of his work - from *Ninja bugeichô* (1959-1962) to *Kamui gai-den* (1982-1987). He depicted the struggle between the have and have-not in an brutally realistic way: people are put to death by thousands, crucified, hacked to death, buried alive, eaten alive by hords of hungry rats, and so on... No wonder, Shirato was venerated in 1968 by uprising leftist students, who used to read *Ninja bugeichô* while in police custody, along with Akiyama's *Zenigeba* - a comic about a brutal loan-shark (FUJISHIMA p.151).

The parental authority has been trampled upon with extremely bad taste since Akatsuka Fujio's *Tensai Bakabon* - serialized in "Shônen Sunday" from 1967 - which portrays the grotesque father of Bakabon as the ultimate idiot. One of the recent hits on the manga stage is the mischievous *Crayon shin-chan*, by Usui Yoshito, published by Futabasha since 1995. While the mischievous little kids of the Western comics - Hergé's *Quick et Flupke* or Rudolph Dirks' *Katzenjammer Kids* - are usually punished for their deeds with a good spanking, Crayon candidly turns the hierarchical order of the society upside-down without any damage for his buttocks.

Unlike female, the male nudity long remained a taboo in the American and Franco-belge comics - and is mostly still so. Manga broke this one too. In 1974, Yamagami Tatsuhiko started *Gaki deka* ("Kid Cop"), whose grotesque hero regularly exposes his buttocks, penis and testicles. *Gaki deka* was greeted by the Japanese audience with such enthusiasm that "Shônen Champion" - completely impervious to the outraged clamor from PTA - ran the series during seven years.

Since *Gaki deka*, police - which Comics Code forbids to portray in a derogatory way - has not been taboo any more for the manga. Policemen are all but ridiculed in one of the most popular series in Japan, drawn by Akimoto Osamu and popularly called *Kochi-kame* (short for *Kochira katsuchikaku to kameari koen mae hashitsujo* - "Here's the police box in front of

Kameari park"), has been continuously running in "Jump Comics" since 1977, and is still doing well.

Thus, the *mangaka* broke one taboo after another. Manga became an art of excesses, whose almost complete freedom and "amorality" ended in combining devastating irony, unrestrained violence, ultimately bad taste and emphatical display of the most extreme human feelings - and at the same time peaceful, joyful, charming characters of enlightening fantasy. Neither the American comics nor the école franco-belge ever approached this level of freedom and unbridled creativity. In contemporary world, where the authoritarian value systems are losing delegitimacy due to social modernization, the manga tradition of the extreme freedom is all the more appealing for the international audience.

#### **Evolving parallel with social trends**

Success is the sole criterion of value in the eyes of manga publishers, and cut-throat competition is the rule of the game among the *mangaka*. Thus, to keep closely in touch with the changing moods of the audience is crucial. The answer cards are used to monitor the trends weekly, and the cartoonists reacts immediatly to the wishes of the audience by modifying the story and upgrading the status of the most well-liked character (ARTE). Evidence of this reactivity - unrivaled in the US and in Europe -is given by the changes which occured in two of the most popular kinds of manga: *yakyu manga* (baseball) and *meka* (short for "mechanical").

The first baseball manga to become a mega-hit was *Kyôjin no hoshi* ("The Star of Giants"), by Kawasaki Noboru, serialized in "Shukan Shônen Magazine" after 1966 - during the best of economic High Growth period. The young hero trains with a fanatical zeal (*moretsu*), just like the salarymen of this period, under the strict supervision and guidance of his father. The next manga-baseball hit was *Otoko doahô kôshien* ("The Super-fanatic of the Kôshien Stadium"), by Mizushima Shinji, serialized in "Shônen Champion" from 1970. The hero is no more unquestioningly obedient to his father. He still trains very hard, but he does it by his own choice. He is "a hero with a consciouness", whos has been raised "in a democratic way" (*minshuteki ni*) (FUJISHIMA p.198). The change reflects the new reality of Japan at the beginning of the 70s - when economic high growth fuelled devastating inflation, speculation and pollution, which in turn aroused the public anger and citizen's movements.

Robots display the same reactivity to social trends. TV sci-fi series which appeared at the beginning of the end of the 60s and the beginning, like the *Go Rangers* and *Kamen Rider*, were insect-like masked cyborgs. The young boys used to transform themselves into cyborgs - shouting "*Henshin!*" (transformation) and wearing masks while imitating the hand-to-hand techniques of their heroes. This first generation of sci-fi battling heroes were succeeded at the beginning of the 70s by the giant Goldorak or Mazinger-type robots, which were operated by brave teenagers human pilots. At the beginning of the 80s, these "hot-blooded heroes of justice" (TAKAYAMA, p.24), often blessed with supranatural powers, were replaced by a new generation of pilots, whose embodiment is Amro, the pilot of *Kidô senshi Gandam* ("The Mobile Warrior Gandam"). Amro is a "midly autistic, self-centered personal computer nut", who is more or less unwillingly pulled into the war. This "too-human hero" was followed in the late 80s - in Sirow Masamune's *Appleseed* - by a generation of pesky pilot-girls.

The friendly robot intended to help the human in the peaceful daily life witnessed a somewhat similar change. Starting in 1970, the famous *Doraemon* (by Fujio-Fujiko duo) is a rather earth-to-earth character. The cat-shaped creature has a mission: it does its best to help the young Nobita to escape the perils of daily life - bullying at school, failing at examinations, obeying his mother, and so on... Doraemon has a useful function of baby-sitter in the real daily world. It acts in a rational - if not always successful - manner. To the contrary, Toriyama Akira's *Arale-chan* - the little girl robot of *Dr. Slump* comedy series (from 1980 to 1985 in "Shônen Jump"), devotes herself solely to play in the utopian Pinguin Village, where there is no school, no adult supervision and no violence. Especially noticeable for her propensity to have lengthy exchanges of views with smelly maggots, *Arale-chan* acts purposelessly in a nonsensical play.

### **Cosmopolitanism**

Like the other Japanese industry, manga has been a late starter which developed by borrowing themes, scenarios, images and techniques from abroad. Tezuka was heavily influenced by Disney, and used to say that he was motivated from the start by the willingness to emulate the American cartoons and animation films. He borrowed again and again subjects from Western literature or history, and titles from famous Western books or movies. His first mega-hit was *Shin takarajima* ("The New Treasure Island", loosely based upon Stevenson's book) in 1946. Afterward, he produced his own versions of *King Kong* (1947), *Faust* (1949), *Metropolis* (1949), *Pinocchio* (1952), Jules Verne's *Le tour du monde en 80 jours* (1952) and Dostoïevski's *Crime and Punishment* (1953) (GROENSTEEN p.65). He

produced a fairly large number of westerns, his own version of Adolf Hitler's life (*Adolf ni tsugu*) in 1985, and even began a TV series drawn from the Bible under the official supervision of Catholic Church (he died before the work was completed) (GROENSTEEN, p.78). As soon as he started drawing *anime*, he tried to emulate Disney's *Fantasia* with his own *Pictures at an exhibition*, using Maurice Ravel's music (1966). Afterward, four of his most famous works are *Senya ichiya monogatari* ("The 1001 nights") in 1969, *Cleopatra* (1970) and *Bremen 4* (based upon an old German tale) in 1981. And when he died in 1989, he left two unfinished works entitled *Ludwig B.* and *Neo-Faust* (GROENSTEEN p.88). Even in his most original manga, one can easily find a lot of Western reminiscences. For example, *Ribon no kishi* ("Princess Knight") displays obvious reminiscences from Zorro, Cinderella, White Snow, Peter Pan, Greek mythology and Alexandre Dumas' *Les trois mousquetaires* (GROENSTEEN p.73-74).

The setting of the first hit of the Takahata-Miyazaki duo was Norway. The third one - *Alps no Shojo Heidi* ("Heidi") - is based upon the famous heart-breaking European serie. (1973). The fourth, *Lupin III: Cagliostro no Shiro*, draws from the French mystery writer Maurice Leblanc. The heroine of the next one, *Nausicaä*, comes from the ancient Greek mythology. And the next to next, *Tenki no Shiro Laputa*, is a reference to the last travel of Jonathan Swift's Gulliver. And from the romantic story of queen Marie-Antoinette (*Beru-bara*) to "Anne Francks Diary" (by Nippon Animation: GROENSTEEN p.59), the manga magazines and *anime* has serialized almost every possible story from the West.

Thus - although manga remained mostly for Japanese audience only - the *mangaka* were very knowledgeable of the Western themes and stories, and very skillful at using them in their own works without losing the Japanese touch. When the time finally came to go abroad, this would help.

*Akira* - the mega-hit of manga abroad - displays precisely this combination of cosmopolitanism and Japanese-ness. The first piece of work of Otomo Katsuhiro was a story based on French writer Mérimées's "Mateo Falcone" (*Jusei* - "Gunshot" - published by the weekly "Action" in 1973). Otomo is also friend with Jean Giraud (alias Moebius), one of the most versatile and successful French BD artist. Moebius is famous for the sci-fi series *L'Incal*, and Jean Giraud for his western hero *Lieutenant Blueberry*, whose influence can be easily traced into *Akira*. Otomo also confesses that he had been inspired by *Star Wars* (SCHILLING p.174)

## AKIRA: THE ULTIMATE GLOBAL MANGA

Born in 1954, Otomo started his career as a *mangaka* at the age of nineteen. He became a cult hero among the sci-fi buffs in 1979 with *Fireball* (about a psychic gril battling a mega-computer). He won recognition and struck rich in 1980 with *Dômu: A Child's Dream*, which sold half-million copies and earned him the Science-Fiction Grand Prix (SCHILLING p.172-173).

Serialized in "Young Magazine" from 1982 to 1991, *Akira* ran more than two thousand pages, and its 38 paperback volumes sold two million copies in Japan. This is only a qualified success by Japanese standards - *Beru-bara* sold more than twenty million. But *Akira* sold five millions abroad - more than any other manga to date. It was published first in the US (1988), then in France, Spain, Italy (1991), Germany, Sweden, South Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia and Brazil. *Akira* the movie, which debuted in Japan in 1988, earned a record-breaking 800 million yen for its distributor Tôhô. The subsequent video version has sold 70.000 copies in the US and 100.000 in Europe - to date (SCHILLING p.174).

From the beginning, *Akira* has been conciously tailored for export. Otomo himself is very internationally-minded, as we noticed. He drew some of the fourteen cover-pages for the the hardbound editions along the aesthetical criterions of European BD, some others according to American taste, and some in a more Japanese style (AKIRA - Vol.14)

The unprecedented success of *Akira* abroad rests upon three main elements: story and characters, technical features and the meanings and feelings that it carries.

### **Akira - the story**

It is not easy to summarize *Akira*, whose story runs along more than 2000 pages. The setting is Neo-Tokyo, year 2019. Thirty years before, the megapolis was destroyed by a formidable blast, which triggered WWIII. The city has been rebuilt. Before the story ends, it will be leveled again and again. And million of lives will be lost.

### **Coming-to-age youngsters**

The main protagonists are children and teenagers. The children are a small group of psychic mutants. They barely survived a military research program intended to unlock their psychic power, that turned them physically into old dwarfs. It was this program which went out of hands and caused the 1988 blast. Undaunted by the cataclysm, the military is still pursuing the secret program, and keeps the most powerful of the children - the 10 years-old Akira - frozen in a secret base.

Then there are two delinquents teenage boys - Kaneda and Tetsuo who has been assigned to a reformatory school. Kaneda leads a bikers' gang. Their life is all drugs, speed, violence and macho friendship - with Tetsuo challenging Kaneda for the leadership of the gang (Vol.1). Nevertheless, as fifteen-years olds, the two boys retain the innocence of childhood. After an unfortunate encounter with a mutant, Tetsuo is forced into the mind-research secret program. He develops an incredibly powerful psychic force that nobody can control. This force gives Tetsuo a devastating power, but inflicts him unbearable physical and mental sufferings, unless he is on drugs. Gradually, he runs amok and his body displays horrifying mutations.

Tetsuo soon runs free from the government's secret lab' and frees Akira from his icy jail (Vol.4). Akira unleashes another burst of power which destroys Neo-Tokyo, insulates it from the rest of the world and brings the society there back to complete anarchy (Vol.6). Tetsuo, who took control of Akira, establishes the evil "Great Tokyo Empire" on the East side of the ruins. The West side is under the benevolent rule of Lady Miyako, a psychic, blind, goddess-like figure, whose shaved priests in white robes care for the survivors. From there, the main question is how to prevent the young and innocent Akira, who is completely unconscious of what's happening (he does not utter a single word until Vol.9), to trigger a cataclysmal chain of events which will destroy the Earth. While Lady Miyako tries to alleviate the suffering of Tetsuo and to help him to regain control of himself, the remnants of the military would rather kill him. In the foreground looms the US Navy, which will resort to the more extreme means - including chemical warfare, carpet bombing of the helpless refugees and giant laser-weapon - in order to eradicate the psychic threat.

Since Tetsuo - at an early stage of the story (Vol.2) - turned his rage against the juvenile bikers' gang and decimated his former friends, Kaneda vowed to kill him by all means. This



vendetta is one of the main line of the story. Kaneda tries everything, from machine-gun and laser to bare hands. But while confronting each other, Kaneda and Tetsuo are still bound by an enduring, underlying friendship. Kaneda is occasionally helped by The Clown, the former leader of a murdering bikers' gang, whose men has also been butchered by Tetsuo on Vol.2. The third teenager is a girl named Kay. She belongs to an underground democratic group which - at the early stage of the story - tries to expose the misdeeds of the military and politicians. She comes to join hands with Kaneda by chance. She is much more mature, courageous and knowledgeable than him. When Neo-Tokyo is turned into ruins, she joins Lady Miyako. She tries to destroy Tetsuo not for personal reasons, but for the sake of the whole humankind. As the story goes by, she develops both psychic power and a romance with Kaneda - whom she kisses for the first and only time on Vol.10.

A fourth teenage character - Kaori - is introduced to the reader only after Neo-Tokyo was destroyed (Vol.6). About thirteen years old, she is forcibly dragged into a deadly drugs-and-sex orgy organized for Tetsuo by his aides, but she survives. This femme-enfant then becomes at the same time a little friend for Akira and a lover (?) for Tetsuo - to whose mind she alone brings some peace. She is killed in Vol.11 trying to save Tetsuo's life.

The story ends in a thermonuclear-like fusion between the "white energy" of the innocent Akira and the "black energy" of the monstrous, desperate Tetsuo. Akira and the mutant children leave the Earth in a scene strikingly similar to The Ascension of Jesus-Christ. The fusion saves the Earth, but what remained of Neo-Tokyo suffers more devastation. At least, the UN Peace Corps comes to the rescue. By then, the surviving youngsters, led by Kaneda and Kay, has established a "Great Akira Empire" of their own. They drive away the UN troopers. On the last page, Kaneda and Kay drive their bike through the highways of the ruined megapolis, which symbolically rebuilds itself as they speed by.

#### **Failed adults**

The main adult characters are The Colonel, Lady Miyako, Nezu the politician, Ryu the leader of the democratic action group, and another member of this group, the housewife-turned-warrior Chiyoko.

The Colonel is a firm believer in the Science, the Army and the Law and order. He constantly relies upon "rational" use of force for cleaning up the mess that his doomed mind-research program caused. After Akira broke from the secret base, he puts Neo-Tokyo under martial

law and comb the city with tanks to find him. After the megapolis was destroyed, he hides into the ruined lab' with a surviving scientist and half-broken computers, and manufactures a makeshift laser-weapon for killing Tetsuo. But his efforts spell only further disaster. In the end, although he recognizes the virtue of the youngsters, he declines to join their "Great Akira Empire".

Lady Miyako embodies the caring love for humankind. As a survivor of the first stage of mind-research program, who "once died and came back from the death", she has an enlightened mind. She is the only one to see the ray of hope for a better future after the chaos. But she shares the responsibility for the chaos, because she failed to control Nezu the politician, whom she used to spy upon the mind-research program. She dies a brave death battling Tetsuo.

Nezu is a hypocritical, power-hungry politician. He tries to control Akira after the young boy escaped from his icy jail, in order to seize the power for himself. He fails. Enraged by his defeat and deadly wounded, he tries to gun down Akira, thus triggering the devastating burst of energy that levels Neo-Tokyo on Vol.6.

Ryu looks like the white angel, at the beginning of the story. He is smart and brave. He fights for the democracy. Kay is enamoured with him. But he is overwhelmed by the loss of his best friend and the destruction of Neo-Tokyo. He turns into a worthless drunkard, who at one time begs Kay for sex. In the end, he comes back to his former self and dies battling Tetsuo side-by-side with Kay, Kaneda and Chiyoko.

Chiyoko is the sole adult who makes it to the "Great Akira Empire". She is a monster of a woman, who carries enormous machine-guns and blows open the heads of his enemies with anything at hands. At the same time, she takes motherly care of Kay and cooks for the youngsters - fully dressed in the Japanese housewife's white apron.

### **The narrative: the "global art" of Otomo**

Akira's narrative is much more complex than in any other comic to date. The story is at the same time a sci-fi adventure complete with laser-weapons and glimpses into various space-time settings, a lengthy initiatic trip by coming-to-age youngsters, a political tale with

references to both domestic and international stages, and a philosophical meditation of a kind about Humankind, Reality and Progress. Thus, *Akira* can please a large range of readers, male and female alike, with diverse cultural background and centers of interests.

Otomo skillfully blends hilarious comedy episodes with tragedy. Death, suffering and devastation are intertwined with bursts of joy and life, mitigated by friendship, motherly love and romance. This complex blend is typical of Shakespeare and many French theatrical plays, but it is very seldom - if ever - used by cartoonists. In the same vein, Otomo introduces not only secondary characters - The Clown, Kaori - but also "tertiary" ones, to whom he carefully gives a full-fledged personality. Although they appear in only a few cels, the reader will vividly remember the lone survivor scientist with his broken spectacles looking for cigarettes, or "Egg-plant", the round-shaped, childish mutant who is killed by an American elite commando while protecting Tetsuo... *Akira's* world is multidimensional, as opposed to the unidimensional world of the American superheroes. It is a "global" comic, if only because it plays upon the largest possible range of human emotions.

*Akira* is an incredible patchwork of Western and Japanese pop culture images, peppered with references to the contemporary history - from Hiroshima to UN Peace Keeping. Tetsuo is especially noticeable in that respect. Among many others, he refers to *James Bond 007*, *2001 The Space Odyssey*, Jesus-Christ, Frankenstein, the Wolfman and the whole web of the characters of the gore sub-culture. His "Great Tokyo Empires" mixes *Lord of the Flies* with Roman circus, nazi death camps and pop-concerts. Thus, *Akira* is also "global" because Otomo makes use of the whole common culture of young people from all over the world.

Nevertheless, *Akira* retains a strongly "exotic" flavour, which explains his success abroad. The initial setting is undoubtedly Japanese - complete with decaying urban highways, military-like school, a huge lot of kanji-displaying signboards, a detailed picture of Tokyo *shitamachi* and politicians in smoke-filled rooms. The kimono-wearing, enigmatic Lady Miyako embodies a heavy lot of the most usual clichés about the Japanese. She seats on her knees on tatamis, offers *o-furo* to her guests, treats them with shinto-inspired philosophy, and perform a kind of ritual reminiscent of *kabuki* before dying a *kamikaze* death... Her Temple comes right from a pictures book about Kyoto, and the priests are dully shaved, buddhist-style. When the rag-tag troops of "Great Tokyo Empire" assault the Temple with guns and rockets, they confront them with non-violence.

In the typical manga style, the main characters physical features - especially their faces - are not very differentiated nor distinctively Japanese. Both Kaneda and Kay display similar

triangular-shaped faces, big round eyes, a small nose like a circumflex accent, and a narrow, thin-lipped mouth. They share these features with Tetsuo and Kaori. But the secondary characters' features are "very Japanese" - thus adding to the appealing exotic touch of Akira. Akira is also "global" because it takes to new heights the narrative movie-like technique typical of manga - first introduced by Tezuka - which greatly helped manga to go abroad because it permit to people all around the world to "read" them without decyphering a single *hiragana* (try the test from Ninja bugeichō on the same Web page). While the Franco-belge BD is by essence "litterary work plus painting", which rests upon verbal narrative techniques, the manga - to quote SCHODT - is "movie cels on paper plus a sound track" where "the pictures alone carries the story". Even the emotions and feelings of the characters are no more conveyed through words, but through over-exaggerated grins on their faces, or almost grotesque body postures - which shocked the Western readers of *Adashi no Gen*.

While toning down posturing and grining a little bit, Otomo nevertheless reduces the verbal narrative to a minimum: in Vol.6, he draws 14 pages without any verbal narrative, and Akira goes from Vol.4 to Vol.9 without uttering a single word. At the same time, Otomo pushes the movie-like narrative techniques to the extreme. He uses close-up, travellings, views from enlarged angle, violently contrasting light and shadow... Especially noticeable is his propensity to change the angle from where the action is shown at a frenetic pace. Sometimes, the scene is shown through five or six different character's eyes in the same page. Thus, the reader musts actively "step into the story": unless he is able to see through the very eyes of the characters, he does not catch what's going on. Also, Otomo keeps jumping from one setting to another; in the most extreme cases, he conducts up to five different stories at the same time - leaping from the US Fleet post of command to Lady Miyayo's Temple, then to a commando struggling in a typhoon, Tetsuo's den, Kay, and back to US Navy... in only a few cels. Unless the "reader" is immersed into the action and follows the narration with instinct - not mind - he is thrown out of the story. The "reader" is not a spectator any more. Just like in a videogame, he/she becomes part of the story and must see the action through the eyes of the characters - or be left out.

Thus, manga is perfectly suited to the mental process of the contemporary "image generation" of youngsters, who learned to perceive the reality through television and action-packed videogames more than through readings and lengthy exchanges of points of views. This experience is now common to young people all around the world - independently of their level of education or cultural background. The peculiar narrative techniques of manga seem to have been tailored especially for them, since almost no printed words are necessary and

the reader is drawn into an interactive relation with the book, as if he/she plays a videogame. In that sense also, manga are "global" - and *Akira* is more "global" than most of them.

### **Transcending "The Original Experience": from parochial to global**

Most of the themes found in *Akira* can be found in many other manga. But Otomo give them a new life echoing the peculiar sensibility of the contemporary youngsters.

The trauma engineered by defeat and A-bomb put an indelible mark on the subconscious of the postwar generation of *mangaka*, including Tezuka. As children, they witnessed the burning of Japanese cities by mechanical B-52 monsters flying out of reach of defender's anti-aircraft guns, and the landing of the tall, white soldiers, riding what seemed to children gigantic armored vehicles mounted with enormous guns. From then, the A-bomb trauma and the ruined, burned and scorched city became what Shiraishi calls "The Original Experience and the Original Picture" of manga. The Japanese cartoonists became obsessed with mechanical things living their own life - hence the unique importance of the theme of the giant warrior-robot, which where foreign to American or European postwar comics. Since Tezuka's *Tetsuwan Atomu*, many manga scenarios revolved around the same recurrent story: the world has been destroyed because technical progress ran out of hands and must be rebuild using mechanical tools. Manga repeatedly raised questions about Progress and Future - while American comics, obsessed by the confrontation with communism, mostly devoted themselves to the glorification of existing social order (the sole setting for Disney's stories) and its preservation (the sole task for the superheroes).

The first generation of *mangaka* was confronted with another psychological trauma: the ignominious failure of their defeated fathers and the anguish of having their parents dead and being abandoned. The typical manga hero is an orphan of a kind, from *Tetsuwan Atomu* - who is rejected by the scientist who built him -to the queen Marie-Antoinette in *Beru-bara* - who is left alone in a foreign, hostile country, far away from her family. Even when he/she is living with his/her parents - as in most children's manga - the young hero is often a bad boy/girl, a failure at school like *Doraemon's* Nobita or a whimsical young mischief like *Crayon shin chan*. Manga is devoted to the dynamism, of the youngsters raising in revolt against their failed fathers, in order to build a brave new world.

*Hadashi no Gen* is all about this story: A-bomb, the tragic death of the parents, the rejection of Gen by coward and egoistic adults, and the young boy keeping unbroken energy and faith in the future. *Akira* is exactly in the same vein. No one of the children or teenagers has parents. When overwhelmed by suffering and anguish, Tetsuo desperately tries to remember his mother. The fatherlike figures - The Colonel and Ryu - are dismaying failures. The "mothers" - Lady Miyako and Chiyoko - are somewhat more successful, and Chiyoko gains entry into the "Great Akira Empire". Nevertheless, they have to either die or be content to follow the youngsters in the end.

Nevertheless, although resting upon the same subconscious material and telling by large the same story, *Gen* failed in the West while *Akira* succeeded. *Gen* was utterly parochial: the Japanese experience of A-bombing was not transcended through a fiction. It seemed completely specific. No Western reader was able to identify himself with the school-uniform wearing *Gen*, who lived in a wood-and-paper house and grinned such ludicrous grins. But Otomo - born nine years after the war - broke free from this parochialism and elevated the Japanese peculiar experience to a "global" significance by using it in a setting mostly devoid of any "Japanism". Every young boy from any country can identify himself with Kaneda. Thus, the phenomenal success of *Akira* - and of other manga - rests upon the elevation of the peculiar traumatic experience deep-rooted into the Japanese psyche to a "global" meaning.

This was made possible only because the Japanese experience of destruction and chaos - revisited by a new generation which did not lived through it - now finds echoes among the young generations all-around the world. When *Gen* was introduced to America, the world seemed in a state of equilibrium. The economy was doing rather well and the Cold War world order was firmly established. The future seemed pre-determined as the direct continuation of the present. Thus, a story about chaos was out of touch with the prevalent mood in the West. But since the beginning of the 90s, the collapse of the Cold War order and the enduring economic crisis cast shadows upon the future. *Akira*, as a tale about the future which is wide open, perfectly fit this new mood.

Let's raise one more point to show how *Akira* precisely echoes the contemporary reality. Since the end of the Cold War, the US military supposedly became "the gendarme of the World". Its so-called supremacy rests mainly upon its ability to keep an eye on every corner of the earth through satellites, and to send vessels and planes anywhere. Nevertheless, the US Army promptly retreated any time it tried to operate in an hostile urban setting like Beyrouth, or deep into the land (Somalie, 1992). It does not venture any more into such

settings. During the Gulf War, land forces were cautiously kept iddle until the Airforce almost finished off the enemy, and even then, Washington did not dare to send them deep into Irak. More generally, the troops of big powers, even equipped with the most sophisticated weaponry, seem unable to overtake any large city if defensors are stubborn: Russian failed in Grozny and the Serbs in Sarajevo. *Akira* plainly takes into account the reality of the contemporary art of war. Tetsuo fights the US military on the skies and on the sea. And in the end, the UN troopers do not dare to enter the ruins of Neo-Tokyo to confront the "Great Akira Empire".

### **Sci-fi fantazy and everyday's life**

Far away from the world order or the geostrategy, Otomo enriches *Akira* with the real-life experiences common to teenagers from all over the world. The success of his work is certainly linked to the fact that its setting is unmistakably the real world, despite the sci-fi and time-space stuff.

This is especially noticeable in the subtle manner in which sexual and romantic emotions are depicted. Although Kaneda begins as young macho who made his teenage mistress pregant (Vol.1), his attempts at seducing Kay are repetedly greeted with slaps in the face - an experience more common than instant victory to many Japanese, American and European boys alike. Kaneda is reduced to shyness as he recognizes that Kay is no a sexual object. While still playing macho in front of her comrades, he must wait until Vol.10 for her to make the first step. Kay is at the same time longing for romantic love and instinctivly affraid of anything sexual. At the beginning, her love is directed towards the fatherly figure of Ryu. She gradually gets rid of it, but her fear of sex remains. All the rascals who try to rape her suffer horrifying deaths - often at the hands of the motherly Chiyoko, who is not very found of sex either and takes care of the virginity of her protégé. Only when she readies for the decisive confrontation with Tetsuo, Kay finds the strenght to give a kiss to Kaneda. This kiss notwithstanding, *Akira* is as clean as a comic can be as far as sex is concerned: no female organs are ever shown, and only one in about 35.000 cels briefly offers a glimpse of a male penis, whose owner is promptly blown off by Chiyoko. This probably accounts for his success, because the blend of desire and fear displayed by Kaneda and Kay when they come to love and sex is how really things are for many youngsters. But Otomo skillfully

provides Kaori to the adult readers to nurse their Lolita complex - while giving a new dimension to this typical manga character by making them into a motherly, caring figure too.

Like in the real life, the characters change as the story goes on. Kay becomes a woman. Kaneda evolves from a little rascal to the leader of the "Great Akira Empire". The Colonel gradually becomes conscious of his misdeeds and failures, and recognizes the value of the youngsters; an iron-man at the beginning, he ends as a tired old man. Ryu evolves from the freedom fighter to a wrecked man, and partially back. The Clown goes the other way, from a murdering gang leader to a brave fighter. This also helps the reader to identify with them, while contributing a great lot to the real-life flavour of *Akira*.

The other part of the initiatic trip by youngsters is about authority and social order. Parents and school are promptly disposed off right at the beginning. Then come more serious questions about politics, the army, the society and world order.

The answer is straightforward: the politicians are either pompous idiots or rascals, the military is all-dangerous, the society is unable to withstand the oncoming changes, and world order is ruthlessly manipulated by the United States... Thus, Otomo recreates "The Original Experience" from Tezuka's generation, by destroying anything, from the skyscrapers of Neo-Tokyo to any kind of authority and any form of social organization.

But the unrivaled appeal of *Akira* to a worldwide audience lies in the fact that the reader must then pick his own answer about what the future will be - and many more.

### **The self-service manga: pick your hero, pick your values, pick your future**

Like many manga, *Akira* displays a wide variety of characters, whose no one is the sole hero. The reader can pick whom he/she wants to identify with. Many *mangaka* use this trick. Fujishima Kosuke (*Taiho shichauzô* -"You're under arrest!") offers the choice between two policewomen: Natsumi - the strong, rebellious, Western-type girl who dares to shout "*baka*" at her boss - and Natsumi - the modest embodiment of Japanese *kawai*. The recipe for success is the same for *Yukan Kurabu* ("The Leisure Club") as analyzed by Maia Tsurumi, with a larger choice of five leading characters (TSURUMI).



*Akira's* reader has plenty of choice. Otomo's characters are not superheroes. Although they show an unusual ability to escape alive from cataclysms, gunfire and laser, they can be injured or killed - and they are. Tetsuo is powerful enough to fly to the moon and to reshape the Earth's poor satellite with his bare hands, but he is nevertheless severely wounded by a laser beam and torn apart by unsufferable sufferings which left him crying and desperate. One might prefer the too-human Kaneda, who mixes utmost bravery with machism, gluttony and cowardice. Kay will appeal to many, since she surpasses the boys in many respects without losing her femininity. But she also has her weak points -her ill-inspired love for Ryu and deep-rooted fear of anything sexual.

Another striking feature of *Akira* is the blurring of values. Only the mischievous politician Nezu is all bad. Most characters changes from bad to good, or the other way, and no change is ever definite. The best embodiment of this ambiguity is the desperate Tetsuo. He was endowed an horrifying power only by chance, and this power tortures him. Like many manga and *anime* "monsters" - whose embodiment is *Godzilla* - he is a victim, not a culprit (SCHILLING). He hangs between absolute bad and lost innocence. He butchers his biker comrades and kills teenage girls during orgies. But he marvels the young, innocent Akira playing with Kaori. In the grips of suffering, he begs for friendship and his lost parents, and crouches into the arms of the (almost) infant Kaori. Significantly, he ends as a monstrous baby - the very symbol of innocence.

The "good" characters display the same ambiguity - most noticeably Lady Miyako. Although she combines the wisdom of old Japanese religious beliefs, the caring love of contemporary NGO for the humankind, and a high degree of organizational ability, she nevertheless fails on all counts. She can not prevent the unleashing of Akira's power. She is unable to alleviate the sufferings of Tetsuo nor to offer him a way out, although he is seeking his help. And in the end, her Temple is destroyed and most of the refugees whom she tried to save are dead.

The character of Akira, which lies at the core of the story, embodies all the ambiguities of Otomo's values system. Akira is an object rather than an actor. He almost does not speak. He has no will of his own. He follows every gang who succeeds at grasping him from the others. He is pure energy. This energy can bring devastation and death, when it is activated by mischievous people. But it ends saving the Earth, by fusing with Tetsuo, at the price of more destruction for what remains of Neo-Tokyo. Thus, Akira is at the same time the ultimate Bad and the ultimate Good. And the fusion of the Good and the Bad spells hope for the mankind.

Even in the most hopeless situation, confronted with overwhelming forces, with devastation and death everywhere, no hope from outside help and no criterion for separating the Good from the Bad, the characters never give up. Their basic motivation - as Kay puts it in Vol.8 - is the will to live and an instinctive comradeship: "we can not give up", "we can not abandon these guys". There are definitively not from the "No future" type.

But as for what the future will be, Otomo does not answer. He treats the reader with lengthy and graphically spectacular lessons about "a new-born mankind", the uninterrupted ADN chain extending from the past to the future, the rising of the all-powerful forces of mind, the ultimate symbiosis between human and more-than-human forms of life, the inner-trip inside one's own psyche, the existence of some other space-time setting, and so on... But all that mix of pseudo-scientific and pseudo-mystical stuff is not to be taken seriously. Only two things are taken for granted. Wisdom and goodwill will not help - as the failure of Lady Miyako testifies - neither will Science. Only youthful energy and the power of the mind will. Here lies the ultimate originality of many manga, which makes them appealing all over the world. They do not carry meaning. They carry process. The essence of their *modus operandi* is symbolized by "the door to anywhere" (*doko demo doa*) which Doraemon opens for Nobita. Act free, young man! Go through the door and see what's behind!

The existing social order is what Disney is all about (DORTMAN and MATTELART). In *Donald's* world, each character has his/her home to which he/she comes back in the end. The rich become richer and richer while the have-not stick to their status. The natives in sunny islands are naive and go half-naked. The villains end up in jail. At the first sight, *Tintin's* world is of the same type - although a more detailed analysis reveals a much more complex work (TISSERON). In *Superman's* world, the Good is Good and the Bad is Bad. After the superhero overcame the villains, the equilibrium is re-established and the world continues as before. And the main pillars of the contemporary école franco-belge - the historical BD and the sci-fi mild fantasy - both display a fundamental similar feature: the chain of events and the space-time setting remains cohesive. Even when the sci-fi characters travel from the past to the future or jump from one planet to another, they go somewhere, by a known mean and for a good reason.

*Akira* blows up altogether the buildings, the social order, the values system and the chronological and logical chain of events. The various time-space settings are intertwined in such a way that one can not understand what relationship - if any - exists between them. And Otomo clearly does not care. Holograms of a kind suddenly appear from nowhere and for no reason in a few cels of Vol.2, then disappear until Vol.12, when the reader is left

wondering why the world will be safe if Kaneda, who happens to have been thrown into a nowhere-to-be-found no-man's land, can grasp the hand of a Kay-like ectoplasm. Similarly, Kaneda mysteriously disappears on Vol.6 and is mysteriously thrown back to Earth among a rain of debris on Vol.8 - without any hint about where he was and why he was expelled from the story. In this episode and many others, the causative chain of events and the time-space setting is broken into pieces.

Thus, *Akira* "makes senses through nonsense". Otomo blows open a lot of *doko demo doa*, including the one to the future - only to let the reader find by himself where they lead. When Lady Miyako tries to "rebuild a meaning" by explaining the "how" and "why" of Tetsuo's sufferings, and how he might put them to a good use in a typically buddhist or christian way, "it's bullshit!", as Tetsuo himself bluntly puts it. There is no definite meaning to anything, and the future is wide open. But the energy of youth, comradeship and love is all what it takes to build another world.

This blend of anarchy with perennial good-old values, sci-fi fantasy with everyday life, psychic mutants with down-to-earth characters, fairytale and politics, tragedy and comedy - artfully packed in a stunning sci-fi thriller with superb drawing and an astonishing narrative ability - proved irresistible for the Western young and not-so-young audience. It introduced manga to the sophisticated readers who used to despise it. It carries a sense of youthful energy and freedom rarely seen in most Western comics. Nevertheless, many coming-to-age generations, in Japan and in the West alike, raised with the same battle-cry. In a sense, *Akira* is nothing new. What's new is that the coming-to-age generation in Japan and in the West shares the same imaginary world. And that a Japanese artist seized the mood and rendered this imaginary world so forcefully that he became a symbol for this generation even outside of Japan. Admittedly, Otomo Katsuhiro is not Jean-Paul Sartre, nor Albert Camus, nor John Kennedy. But on a lesser scale, he also is a flag-bearer for a new generation all over the world - may be an historical first for a Japanese. Here lies the significance of *Akira*.

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